

SERMON: MUSING MAGIC

by Becky Brooks

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I listen to a lot of audiobooks with my kids, but I almost never listen to audiobooks on my own, so I'm not sure why I chose to listen to instead of read *Big Magic* when it first came out. Just one of those things. I was at the gym. I had hopped on my favorite treadmill for a long walk and was listening the dulcet tones of Elizabeth Gilbert, when she says this thing about magic. And I'm—quite honestly—stunned. I stopped walking, I was so stunned—which was a problem on the treadmill! But when I recovered, I rewound the book to listen to it again. *Magic*, she said. For real.

Gilbert believes these sentient, disembodied spirits alight somewhere in the hopes that a human will make them manifest, as she says. I had never heard something so fantastic and ridiculous that made so much sense.

This idea isn't original to Gilbert, of course.

She takes us on a tour of ancient Greek and Roman cultures, where a "genius" referred not to a talented human or an individual's uniqueness, but rather a guiding spirit, separate from them, from whom a human would receive their ideas.

The value she articulates in this way of thinking is in a kind of distance between what one creates and what one accomplishes. The idea has a job, and the artist has a job. It might be a good marriage. It might not. If something doesn't work out, whose to say who's responsible? Just dust yourself off and try again.

And this isn't just art we're talking about. I think you can understand this as a relationship between any idea and anyone trying to create anything. An idea for a poem shows up for a poet, an idea for an economic system shows up to an economist. If I want to create a thing, I need an idea. I need to give that idea my attention, get to know it, take care of it, and make it real.

In his book *Every Idea is a Good Idea*, Tom Sturges points out that "Every 'thing' started out as just an idea to someone." *Everything!* That wall, that chair, the last song we sang, the co-op where you buy your groceries, the National Parks system. Everything begins as an idea.

But without care and attention and nurture and work, that idea ain't gonna happen—no matter how brilliant or transformative.

Sturges tells a story about Diane Warren in his book. One of the most prolific and accomplished song writers in history. Sturges writes “When I called to her to say I was writing a book on creativity and wanted to feature her in it, her answer was not unexpected. She said “I’m in the middle of a song right now. Can we do it later?” I said, “Just tell me in a nutshell—in miniature.” She said, “Okay, just say this...Say ‘Diane Warren shows up.’” (78).

And so we must. It’s in the “showing up” that makes ideas into reality. We must show up even when it’s hard.

There’s a story I recently read about french novelist Victor Hugo. Having angered his publisher by procrastinating through the time he was given to finish his book project, the publisher gave him what we call today a “drop dead deadline.” He had exactly six months to write a little book we now know as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Endlessly creative in all he did, Hugo even figured out a creative way to improve his focus. He gathered up all of his clothes except one large gray shawl and locked away. For nearly six months he sat in his long gray shawl and wrote and wrote. He delivered the manuscript with weeks to spare.

That’s a man who takes good care of his ideas. (eventually!)

So often when we think about creativity, we focus on the arts. But creativity weaves its way through all the joined together places in our lives. Every problem is solved with creativity.

I live in Baltimore. The street I live in is fairly generic. We have older people and younger people, black people and white people. Everyone has a pretty nice house and a pretty nice car, but nothing too fancy. We know each others names, but we’re not in each others business. But less than a mile away there’s another Baltimore. This is the Baltimore you hear about on the news: “The Most Dangerous City in America,” according to USA Today. Unlike my neighborhood, this Baltimore has seen decades of corrupt policing, defacto incarceration, environmental hazards like lead paint and polluted water, the disappearance of grocery and department stores, and the death of local manufacturing and other jobs. In the midst of it all, this avoidable storm of systemic racism, deep poverty, and violence. In this Baltimore, nearly everyone knows a victim of gun violence. One of many problems waiting for a creative solution.

One night, community organizer Erricka Bridgeford, was at a meeting for a project she was involved with and another activist shared an idea he had: what did she think about calling a ceasefire weekend in Baltimore? She tells this story in an amazing Ted Talk. She set her organizer brain to the task and got out her calendar. She picked a weekend in August to try out the ceasefire, she was ready to go spread the word! But when she starts driving to work, the doubts begin to creep in again. She says in her talk, “The more I drive, the scarer I get. I start goin’ “never mind” I won’t say this thing out loud.

Nobody will ever know I was thinking it if I don't say it." But what she says about this idea is "it wouldn't let me go!"

This thing, this idea of a ceasefire, felt big to her. It was risky. What if it didn't work? *What it didn't make a difference at all?*

But the idea wouldn't let her go.

Tom Sturges calls creativity "a gift, from life to us."

To share that idea, to express it using our minds or bodies or voices or efforts, is to build a connection between ourselves and others. Sometimes that goes beautifully well. To make good art is a feeling like no other. This is to feel connected—to *be* connected, all courtesy of this idea that visited me—*chose* me—it's an extraordinary feeling. Gilbert uses the Greek word "Eudaimonia" (well-daemoned) which refers to the particular kind of happiness a person feels when their relationship with their daemon, their *genius*, is satisfying, fulfilled. They are living the life they are meant to live.

But it isn't always like that, right? It's absolutely not like that when I don't show up to do my part.

If we understand our idea as a companion, if we understand ourselves to be in relationship with this precious, powerful, maybe fragile thing: this *idea*. It means we are accountable to it.

The idea of a ceasefire wouldn't let Erricka Bridgeford go, and she didn't let her fear stop her. There are three components to the ceasefire project: "helping each other get the resources they need in their lives," "having conversations with each other about how to handle conflict differently," and "making commitments to one another to be non-violent in thoughts, words, and deeds." It's a deeply ambitious project for half a million people to engage in, even just for a weekend.

She had no control over whether this idea was going to "work" or how it might turn out. It might backfire. It might be magic. But she realized that only *part* of it was her responsibility. Her job was to give this idea a way to be real—to care it into being, like a Velveteen Rabbit. And she was ready to do her part. As Elizabeth Gilbert says, "the only way an idea can be made manifest in our world is through collaboration with a human partner." Erricka Bridgeford puts it this way: "God loves to show up as *us*."

I think these are the same thing. I'm an agnostic, and I'll admit that I don't know whether there's a god or not. But what I *do* know for sure is that if there is a god, the only *possible* way god can show up in this world and do anything at all, is as *us*. Just as surely as I know that the only way my novel idea can become a novel is if I sit my butt down in the chair and write it. The *only* way that painting is becoming real is for your

hands to paint it. The only way that peace is possible is if we are peaceful. Not someone else another time, but me, you, us, *now*.

God loves to show up as *us*.

This concept of an idea having it's own needs is why I love this book, *What Do You Do With an Idea?* by Kobi Yamada. But in scripting it for you this morning, I'll admit I did change one important thing. At the end of the book, Yamada reveals what you do with an idea. He writes: "I realized what you do with an idea: You change the world."

To be honest, I think we do ourselves a disservice when we sound out this call to *change the world*. Changing the world with an idea is possible. It's amazing and magical when it happens. But what happens when I don't? It's an inordinate amount of pressure.

You know that moment in a movie or a book where one person looks deep into the eyes of another person and says "Don't worry, I will never let anything bad happen to you ever again." What comes next?

To be human is to make promises to each other and to be human is to—sometimes—break promises. I have a covenant with my twins. My daughter was five when she came up with it and its name: The Agreement. We promise to listen to each other and we promise not to yell. But sometimes we make mistakes. When we were coming up with covenant, I asked them what we should do when one of us messes up and doesn't listen, or when one of us—me—yells. My daughter suggested that we should said we're sorry and follow it with "I reassign myself to The Agreement." So this is what we say. And though I was skeptical at the time, I cannot tell you how it has changed our lives together.

It would have been easy for me to say, back then, "I promise I'll never yell again." That's what wanted to say. But we all know how that would have turned out. Instead, we have an aspiration and a system of accountability. Those kids are raising me right!

Because there are things we can control and things we can't, right? I can't wave a magic wand and remove all conflict from my relationship with my kids. But I *can* take responsibility for how I react when conflict arises.

Similarly, there's not a single thing I will ever do that's likely to change the world. All I can do is change myself. And I've learned that trying to take responsibility for things I can't control is often only a clever way to avoiding taking responsibility for the things I can control.

Erricka Bridgeford isn't going to stop the violence in Baltimore. This was what her doubt was all about: this problem is too big for little you—you can't change the world. But because her idea wouldn't let her go, she gave her idea her attention and got to know it

better. She understood that even if she can't stop all the violence in Baltimore, she *can* say:

I—personally—am going to take responsibility for my temper and my actions.

I—personally—am not going to be numb anymore and recognize every lost life.

I—personally—am going to show my love for these neighbors of mine through working every day to help make our lives better.

She gave herself this job. Her name for this is to “vibrate higher” and it’s through doing this work, faithfully, responsibly, that she inspires others to take on the work. For a full year, the site of every murder in Baltimore has been visited by the Ceasefire Squad and members of the community to draw a sacred circle of love. That wasn’t happening before. On Ceasefire weekends, the city is filled with the hum of music and job training and health screenings and legal aid and testimony.

Has Erricka Bridgeford and the Ceasefire Squad changed the world? Maybe. I’d love to tell you that the Ceasefire cut the murder rate in Baltimore by X percent, but the truth is that it was the “Most Dangerous City in America” that first Ceasefire weekend in 2017 and it’s still the “Most Dangerous City in America” this month, even as the project has continued. What I know for a fact that I have neighbors in my city who are alive today who wouldn’t be without the thousands of regular folks doing their part of this creative, generative, life-affirming work.

All starting with an idea and a woman who said “maybe this will help.”

That’s a partnership. A creative idea, with a life of its own, that won’t let you go. And committed, full-hearted work to make the idea real, to bring it to life.

Ray Bradbury once wrote “That’s the great secret of creativity. You treat ideas like cats: you make them follow you.”

Because before the product, before the work, before the idea, we have to find each other. We have to put ourselves where our ideas can find us. We have to go to the meeting, sit at the keyboard, try and fail, put up the posters, pick up the brush, practice the scale, take the risk. If we want an idea to follow us, they’re going to want to know we’re serious. They’re going to want to know we’ll take care of them; we’ll keep up our end of the bargain. We must build a place where an idea will want to make a home.

It’s as simple as that. As *hard* as that.

Every relationship is a lot of work, and—when we’re lucky, a little bit of magic.

May your ideas always find you and may you make a beautiful home, together.